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A Depiction of Remedial Students' Characteristics

Hisayo HERBERT

The Language Center of Kwansei Gakuin University launched the highly anticipated remedial English course in 2017. Just over 200 students were collected from five different undergraduate schools (or faculties) as the result of their poor test scores obtained prior to their entrance to the university. One of the greatest challenges of starting a new program is not knowing the characteristics and background of the students. This paper is intended to provide better understanding and clearer illustration of the participating students from the results of the survey conducted at the end of the spring and fall semesters in the 2017 academic year. Though the surveys were rather brief and inconclusive, they nonetheless revealed some portion of the students' past experience with English classes and how they perceive their English ability. While the spring survey responses insinuated the disengagement in their English learning, the fall survey implied a positive change in their attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Residing in an era when more than 50% of Japanese enter college (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, Japan, 2017), considering remedial education at Japanese universities is inevitable. Likewise, the disappointment of college English teachers over a new generation of college students who have not yet reached the English ability appropriate for studying in college keeps growing. As the number of such students has been increasing, colleges and universities have started to reach out to them and create remedial or developmental English courses.

Especially in private colleges which offer a variety of avenues for their college admission, they cannot guarantee a standard level of English that their students possess at the beginning of their college years any longer. Each college struggles to manage those students who fail their required English courses, as well as those who do not meet the standard English level the college or department expects them to reach upon their graduation.

Not all universities present the same solution to these students. Some offer private tutoring systems as well as separate non-credit support courses on

Saturdays (Tamura et al, 2010). Okuba and Fukumoto (2013) introduced their sheltered classes which correspond to regular College English courses, aiding those students who may fall behind otherwise. Tsuda (2007) also suggests the abundance of “repeater classes.” And, Kiyota (2011) reports that many universities assign students into classes according to their proficiency levels and tailor courses accordingly. As Okuba and Fukumoto (ibid) suggest, some visible, though not concrete, purpose for “remedial English courses” can be short listed: to meet the societal expectations for English levels appropriate for college graduates (of a certain university); to review high school English, to enable students to use English to study or research in other college courses of their majors; to assist students’ English learning, so that they can continue into “regular” English courses; or to create autonomous learners who do not fail their required English courses repeatedly.

Regardless of the purpose, to provide a successful remedial English class is not an easy task because the background of students placed in such classes varies dramatically. Some learners have simply neglected the importance of studying English in their high school days, or some may have family or social issues. In addition, most of the students bring their lost confidence and discouragement toward English into the classroom. The variety of learner difficulties makes it hard to envision the best way to approach remedial classes, and many instructors of such classes wish they could know the characteristics of the students better in order to prepare better for them.

INTRO ENGLISH PROGRAM

As its own way of struggling with the new generation of students underachieving with English, and with the increased need for action to offset such underachievement, the Language Center of Kwansei Gakuin University launched a highly anticipated remedial English program in 2017. The English courses called “Intro English” are offered to 220 students university-wide as the result of their poor test scores obtained prior to their entrance to the university. Five undergraduate schools (or faculties) within the university from both the Uegahara and Sanda campuses, Theology, Law and Politics, Economics, Business Administration, and Science and Technology, joined the program. Each of these five schools placed some of their students into the Intro English program, and some other schools may possibly join in the future. Those who were placed in the program would take two years (i.e. four semesters) worth of required English credits from the Language Center’s Intro English classes instead of from their own English programs offered within their schools.

The first-year students, upon acceptance to the abovementioned schools, received the instruction to take the placement test online. Benesse's Global Test of English Communication (GTEC), which is widely used as a placement test in Japanese colleges, was used to assess the new freshmen's listening and reading ability. Once scores were obtained, those 220 students who scored the lowest were notified of their placement into ten Intro English classes.

Students in Intro English are required to attend Intro English IA and Intro English IB each semester of their first year and Intro English IIA and IIB for those in the second year. Each class meets once a week. Every "A" course indicates communication instruction, especially a speaking and listening focus taught by native speakers of English, while "B" specifies a reading and grammar focus taught by bilingual Japanese teachers of English. Though the focus of each section is apparent in each syllabus, the skills practiced in both sections are not limited to the indicated focuses.

Though all framework and content of the courses were well-prepared, the 2017 academic year commenced with little knowledge of the anticipated Intro students themselves. While many experienced teachers speculated on the characteristics of those students, the learning profiles of these students appeared obscure until the actual commencement of the program. Furthermore, even after the commencement, the obscurity remained regarding their background and experience with English learning. In the hope of clarifying some of the mysteries to prepare ourselves for smoother operation in future classes, some questions about them were asked to the Intro English students in the final classroom survey.

SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

Many of those well-constructed guesses about Intro English students appeared to be correct, such as many being athletes of a sort and many feeling insecure in their English ability. However, more information on their background and experience helps further planning of a better remedial course which would suit the coming students, as well as assist their learning accomplished through their two years in the program.

The Intro English course's end-of-semester class surveys were conducted separately from the general university-wide survey. The questions were mainly about the students' opinions on classroom operation and management; however, some questions inquire about students' thoughts about English learning and their experience during high school days and their opinion about their own learning of English. The spring survey was conducted in July 2017, and the fall survey, December 2017 and January 2018, all during the final week of each semester.

Respectively, 202 and 191 students answered the surveys. The following are the particular questions and responses which convey the purpose of this paper, as they offer the most insightful depictions of Intro students. The surveys were conducted fully in Japanese, their native language, and the original wording in Japanese is included in the Appendix.

Spring Survey

The first question of the spring survey asked the students to reflect on their English learning in their junior and senior high schools. Table 1 shows the question and its response results.

TABLE 1
Spring Question 1

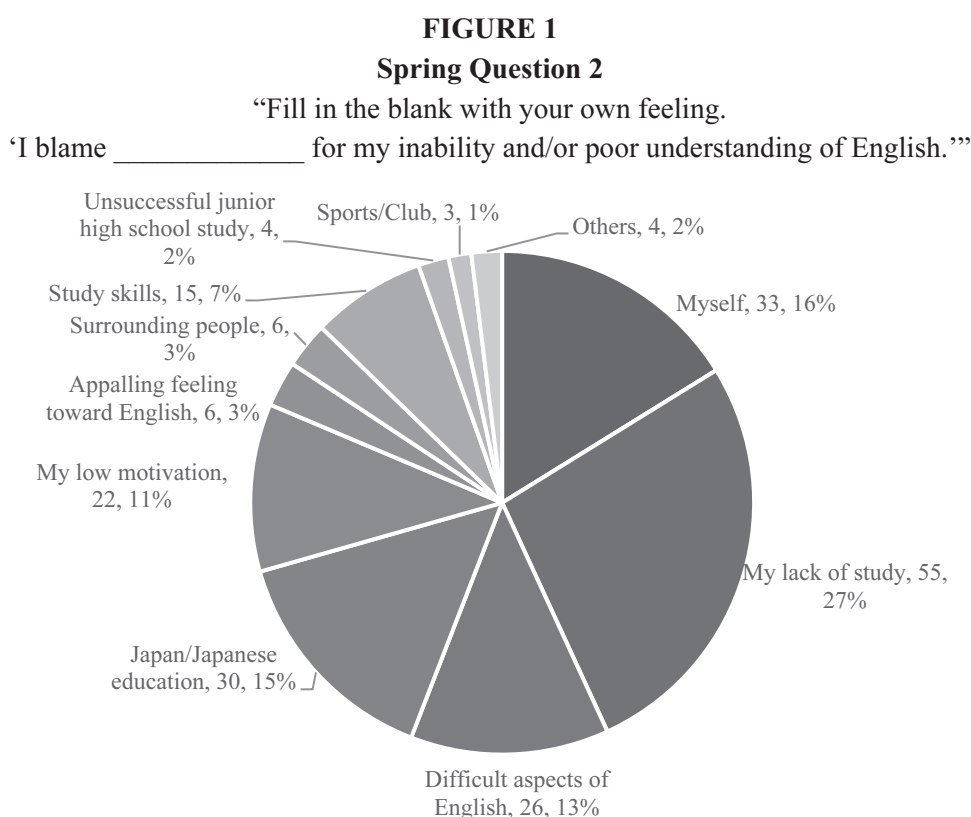
“Select all that apply to your English learning during your junior and senior high school days.”

Selections	Responses	Percentage
I did my homework	113	55.9
I gave priority to club activities (sports/arts) before English learning.	93	46
I had some fun English classes.	90	44.6
I often forgot the words I memorized.	87	43.1
I disliked some of my English teachers.	53	26.2
I was lost in my English classes during my junior high school days.	44	21.8
I was lost in my English classes during my senior high school days.	57	28.2
I memorized a lot of words.	54	26.7
My grades for English were good on average.	52	25.7
My grades for English were bad on average.	62	30.7
I gave priority to my friends and hobbies before English learning.	38	18.8
I prepared for lessons beforehand and reviewed them afterwards.	22	10.9
The content of my textbooks was interesting.	20	9.9

For this multiple selection question, the most frequently selected item was the one regarding their homework. Among 202 Intro students, 113 (55.9%) indicated that they in fact completed their English homework regularly during their high school days. The second and third most common responses reflected their enthusiastic participation in clubs and difficulty in retaining vocabulary

knowledge. That is, 93 out of 202 students (46%) indicated that they had prioritized their clubs over English learning, and 87 students (43.1%) indicated that they feel they quickly forget their memorized vocabulary. In contrast to their attentiveness for homework, only 10.9% of them indicated that they had prepared for their high school English lessons beforehand and reviewed them afterwards. Another selection item of low response concerned the content of English textbooks. Only twenty students (9.9%) indicated that their high school English textbook was interesting. All other items were only selected by 20-25% of students.

The second question of the spring survey inquired about the students' perspective toward their lack of English ability, as shown in Figure 1.



As students filled the blank with their own answers, the outputs were sorted into 10 categories. Out of 202 students, 55 of them (27%) blamed their lack of study and also 33 (16%) blamed themselves. When including “my low motivation” of 6 students (3%), 94 students, almost half of students, admitted

their own shortcomings for underachievement. On the other hand, 36 students (18%) placed the blame on their surroundings, which is the combination of two categories, “Surrounding people” and “Japan/Japanese Education.”

The third question asked Intro students to reflect on the reason for their low GTEC scores, which had forced some of them unwillingly into the Intro English program.

TABLE 2
Spring Question 3

“What do you think was the largest reason you received low score on the GTEC?”			
	Selections	Responses	Percentage
My lack of study in my junior and senior high schools		95	47
My lack of continuous study after my acceptance to this college		47	23.3
My unserious approach toward the test		41	20.3
Unwell state of my health		6	3
Some technical problems with the computer and/or headphones.		5	2.5
The unsuitable test environment, such as noise		2	1
Other		6	3

As shown in Table 2, more than 70% of the students, combining the first two items, felt the cause of the low score to be their own negligence of study either throughout their English learning in high schools, or for the past few months prior to GTEC. In addition, another 20% of the students blamed their wrong or unserious attitude when they took the test. Thirteen students (7%) suggested that unsuitable conditions, such as their health, environment, or technical problems, were the cause.

The fourth question of the spring semester showed some insights about student preferences regarding activities in their Intro English IB classes. Table 3 summarizes the result.

Though I will not discuss the content of each activity, this list reflects the activities that students encountered in the IB section of the course during the spring semester. Ninety-six students (47.5%) indicated their desire for more grammar exercises, which was a significantly higher response frequency than the other activities. The second most popular activity was listening activities, though much fewer students (51 students, or 25.2%), selected this activity in comparison to the grammar exercises.

TABLE 3
Spring Question 4

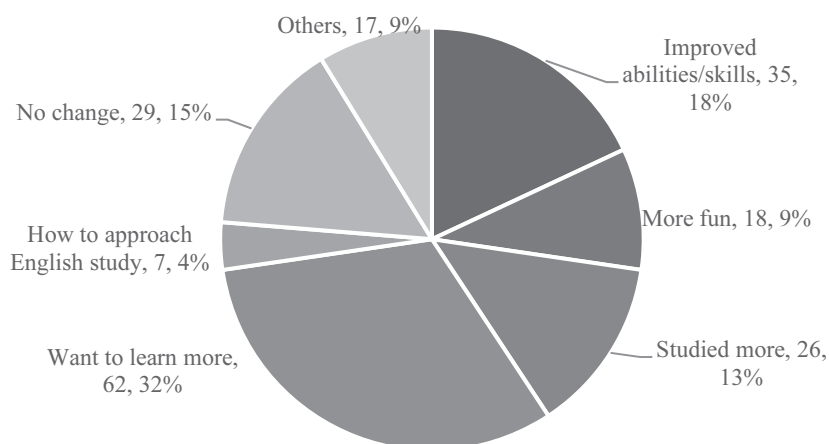
“What do you want to do more in Intro English IB class? (Multiple Selection)”		
Selections	Responses	Percentage
Grammar exercises	96	47.5
Fill-in-the-blank listening activities	51	25.2
Read aloud	37	18.3
Reenactment of textbook conversations	32	15.8
Shadowing	24	11.9
Extensive reading with graded readers	15	7.4
Dictation	11	5.4
Reading from non-textbook recourse	10	5
Dictogloss	7	3.5

Fall Survey

The fall semester survey was conducted in almost the same manner with a slightly different set of IA instructors and a somewhat different set of survey questions at the end. The first question of the survey in fall semester asked the Intro students if their attitude toward studying English had changed in any way, after taking two semesters worth of Intro English.

FIGURE 2
Fall Question 1

“Has your feeling toward English learning changed from last spring?
Please describe what has changed.”



For this question shown in Figure 2, 191 students wrote their own answers. All of them are sorted into six labelled categories plus the undetermined category of “others.” Those answers that indicated their improvement in their English abilities, such as “I can listen better,” were placed under “Improved abilities/skills.” “Want to learn more” includes responses that showed their realization of the importance of studying more English. Some of these specifically expressed the need for certain English skills while many stated their general desire to learn more. Those which indicated that they had changed their strategies for learning English were categorized as “How to approach English study.” For example, answers such as “I recognized the importance of daily learning of English” and “I came to think of the context instead of memorizing everything” were placed into this category.

Fall Question 1 showed positive changes the students felt after taking Intro English classes. Many indicated their wish and perceived need to learn English more, as 62 students (32%) joined in this category. Twenty-six students (13%) stated they spent more time studying English, and 35 students (18%), indicated the feeling of their improvement in English. Though not overwhelming in number, 18 people (9%) mentioned that they had come to enjoy learning English.

The second question in the fall survey aimed to find out the areas in which students felt they had improved by taking Intro English IB in the fall semester.

TABLE 4
Fall Question 2

“What do you think you acquired through Intro IB? (Multiple selection)”			
	Selections	Responses	Percentage
Grammatical knowledge		144	75.4
Reading skills		116	60.7
Vocabulary		104	54.5
Listening skills		99	51.8
A habit of preparing for class		68	35.6

As shown in Table 4, many students indicated improvement of the skills that had been targeted in the Intro English IB: reading and grammar.

The last question in the fall survey elicited the students’ thoughts toward activities done in the fall semester. Table 5 shows the question and its results.

TABLE 5
Fall Question 3

“Select all the activities you thought helpful for improving English.”		
Selections	Responses	Percentage
Fill-in-the-blank listening activities	104	54.5
Grammatical exercises	102	53.4
Vocabulary quizzes	92	48.2
Reading with obstacles	80	41.9
Extensive reading with graded readers	75	39.3
Scrambled sentences/words from the textbook	62	32.5
Online homework of the textbook	59	30.9
Reading from non-textbook resources	37	19.4
Short compositions with provided theme	36	18.8

As in the spring, both listening activities and grammatical exercises received the highest selection frequency with each over a hundred students (54.5% and 53.4% respectively).

DISCUSSION

Although the abovementioned survey results do not capture all the characteristics of the Intro students, they by and large reveal some tendencies in their backgrounds, attitudes and preferences regarding English study and the Intro English IB course. It depicts students who made the least necessary effort to pass their high school English course. However, they also realize and admit their neglect in effort to learn, and now realize that they need to learn grammar. After taking the Intro English courses for two semesters, students seem to take English learning more into their own hands in a more engaged manner.

Spring Survey

In Spring Question 1, few students indicated that they tried very hard to study English. Not many students chose items such as “I often prepare for lessons beforehand and reviewed them afterwards.” Only a quarter of students indicated that they had made an effort to memorize vocabulary, which many high schools in Japan are eager to force their students to do. On the other hand, almost half of them willingly chose to tell that they had enthusiastically engaged in club activities rather than studying English. Furthermore, both Spring Question 2 and 3 illustrate those students’ recognition of their own responsibility for not receiving good GTEC scores and not learning English. The surprising information that almost half of the Intro students mentioned grammar exercises as the activity they

would like to continue working on suggests that they are aware of their lack of knowledge. Plus, the overall reluctance to choose items in Spring Question 1 seems to suggest their disengagement from the English learning in their high schools.

Fall Survey

Above all, in the fall survey, Fall Question 1 directs our attention to the changed positive attitude students claimed to have. Combining “Improved abilities/skills,” “More fun,” “Studied more,” “Want to learn more,” and “How to approach English study” together, three-fourths of all students (76%) noted that their attitude and motivation had improved or that they had become more engaged in English learning. In addition, though the words of Spring Question 4 and Fall Question 3 differ in details, it seems more students were eager to express positive attitudes toward presented activities in fall than in spring. Both questions having the option for multiple selections, students were able to choose as many answers as they wished. In spring, the most popular activities such as listening and grammar exercises attracted only 147 responses together; on the other hand, in the fall, those two activities alone obtained 206 responses. Other items of similar kinds as well as overall high number of responses in fall mildly suggest the students’ stronger commitment to their own learning. Assured by their improvement in skills from Fall Question 2, Intro students in the fall may have become slightly more confident, motivated and engaged students of English.

CONCLUSION

The two surveys with seven questions revealed some interesting insights about the students who were placed into remedial English courses. Though the characteristics of these students may not have been elucidated as clearly as one desired, having a better understanding of students’ opinions and their reflection on their own learning of English always aids the preparation of better programs and classrooms. These limited questions illustrated that after two semesters of remedial English, many students who recognized their prior negligence towards study were now potentially autonomous learners who wished to study more. As Shiozawa (2004) suggests, remedial education should envision a classroom that nurtures autonomous learners, and the survey results presented in this paper may lead to the vision of such a successful remedial program when further studies have been conducted.

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APPENDIX: Survey Questions in Japanese

Spring Survey

春質問 1. 中学、高校での英語学習についてあてはまるものを全て選択して下さい。(複数選択可)

- 楽しい英語の授業があった
- 嫌いな英語の先生がいた
- 予習復習はよくした
- 宿題はきちんとやった
- 英語学習よりは部活（スポーツ・芸術等）を優先した
- 英語学習より友達や趣味を優先した
- 教科書の内容は面白かった
- 単語を沢山覚えた
- 単語は覚えてもすぐ忘れる
- 英語の成績は平均的によかった
- 英語の成績は平均的に悪かった
- 中学で英語はわからなくなった
- 高校で英語はわからなくなった

春質問 2. 次の文にもっとも当てはまると思う一言を入力してください。

「私が、英語ができない、わからないのは（ ）のせいだ。」

春質問 3. 入門英語へのクラス分けに使われたテスト(GTEC)の得点が低かった最大の理由は何だと思いますか。

- 中学、高校での勉強不足
- 合格(進路決定)後の勉強不足
- 体調不良
- GTEC 受験時 パソコン、ヘッドホン等の機械的なトラブルがあった
- GTEC 受験時に騒音等の邪魔になる要因があった
- GTEC の解答に真面目に取り組まなかった
- その他（ ）

春質問 4. 入門英語 I B (ハーバート担当授業)の授業内活動でもっとやりたいと思うものを選んでください。(複数選択可)

- 文法問題
- 音読
- 教科書の会話再現
- リスニングの穴埋め

シャドーイング
ディクトグロス
ディクテーション
教科書以外のリーディング
多読

Fall Survey

秋質問 1. 英語学習に対する思いは春学期の始めと比べて変わりましたか。変わったと思うところを記述してください。

秋質問 2. 入門英語 IB(ハーバート担当授業・秋学期)を通して身についたと思うことは何ですか。(複数選択可)

リスニング力
リーディング力
語彙力
文法知識
予習の習慣
その他 ()

秋質問 3. 英語力向上に役に立ったと思うものはどれですか。(複数選択可)

文法問題
リスニングの穴埋め
負荷をかけた音読 (穴埋めしながら読む、見えないところを予測して読む)
教科書の本文を並べ替えながら穴埋め (JUNKS and BLANKS)
テーマを決めての自由作文
教科書以外のリーディング(時間をはかって読むもの)
多読 (簡単な英語読本)
中間期末テスト (に向けての自習)
Quiz(授業中の小テスト)
Quizlet (アプリ)
リンガポルタ